

Covert Cadre: What I saw leading up to the US Capitol attack

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The deadly riot at the US Capitol bore the markings of an organized operation planned well in advance of the January 6 joint session of Congress.

A small number of cadre used the cover of a huge rally to stage its attack. Before it began, I saw from my vantage point on the West Front of the Capitol, what appeared to be four separate cells or units:

1. **Plainclothes militants.** Militant, aggressive men in Trump and MAGA gear at a front police line at the base of the temporary presidential inaugural platform;
2. **Agents-provocateurs.** Scattered groups of men exhorting the marchers to gather closely and tightly toward the center of the outside of the Capitol building and prevent them from leaving;
3. **Fake Trump protesters.** A few young men wearing Trump or MAGA hats backwards and who did not fit in with the rest of the crowd in terms of their actions and demeanor, whom I presumed to be Antifa or other leftist agitators; and
4. **Disciplined, uniformed column of attackers.** A column of organized, disciplined men, wearing similar but not identical camouflage uniforms and black gear, some with helmets and GoPro cameras or wearing subdued Punisher skull patches.

All of these cells or groups stood out from the very large crowd by their behavior and overall demeanor. However, they did not all appear at the same time. Not until the very end did it become apparent there was a prearranged plan to storm the Capitol building, and to manipulate the unsuspecting crowd as cover and as a follow-on force.

Eyewitness account, with no outside details

This article is a first-person, eyewitness account drafted the night of January 6 and morning of January 7, so it is not affected by other news coverage or information. The only research aids used in this article were photos and videos that I took from my phone. I have witnessed and participated in scores of protests since the 1970s, when as a high school student I was trained by professional agitators from California. Apart from my own professional background and experience, nothing in this article is derived from any third-party information or analysis.

In editing this for publication, I fought the temptation to add new information that I had subsequently learned from my own or from other people's accounts. Other reports will vary and may contain contradicting information, and will contain far more facts than appear here. Many well-known actions and developments reported in the news do not appear here, as this is purely what I saw and understood between about 11:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. on Wednesday, January 6.

Capitol Police anti-riot unit prepared early, but presence was light

Originally I had planned not to attend any of the several pro-Trump protest events scheduled for that day. At the last minute, a companion and I decided to see what we could see. Late that morning, at about 11:30, I walked from near Union Station to the Senate side of Capitol Hill on 2nd and D Streets NW and noticed a small number of Capitol Police dressed in full riot gear, with shin guards and shoulder guards. One carried a black baton with side handle. "That's old school," I called to the officer, giving him a thumbs-up. The police appeared to be readying to board a van or bus, though the Capitol was only 2-1/2 blocks away.

I crossed behind the Russell Senate Office Building to Constitution Avenue near the Capitol, past some out-of-towners who pointed at the Capitol and asked if it was the White House, then walked for about 25 minutes up Pennsylvania Avenue toward an empty Freedom Park.

A rally had just taken place there and moved to the Ellipse, the large lawn between the White House and Constitution Avenue NW. President Trump was speaking to a huge crowd at the Ellipse, though the Freedom Park rally had broken up to assemble at the Capitol before we arrived.

For such a massive event, police presence was light. District of Columbia police and a small group of DC National Guard had a relaxed demeanor, keeping a professional distance from marchers and other pedestrians as they usually do. A few police and National Guard gathered in around a mobile device to listen to the president make what sounded like rousing comments.

Crowd was energized and festive, not angry or incited

A while later we saw from a block away that marchers had begun down Constitution Avenue from the Ellipse to Capitol Hill, mostly along Constitution Avenue. We passed down 13th Street to join them. Although the march was in protest of electoral fraud in the 2020 election and people were recounting the president's energizing speech, the mood of the crowd was positive and festive. Strangers stopped to talk to one another along the way, resist but ultimately give in to offers from street vendors hawking Trump and MAGA memorabilia, or to take pictures of the Washington landmarks.

Some along the way talked enthusiastically about President Trump joining them on Capitol Hill, as if he had said something about it in his Ellipse speech. I didn't want to pop their balloon by saying that he undoubtedly would not. There was an expectation in the air that he would be there.

Of the thousands of people I passed or who passed me along Constitution Avenue, some were indignant and contemptuous of Congress, but not one appeared angry or incited to riot. Many of the marchers were families with small children; many were elderly, overweight, or just plain tired or frail – traits not typically attributed to the riot-prone. Some said they were police officers from around the country. Many wore pro-police shirts or carried pro-police “Back the Blue” flags.

Diverse cross-section of America

Among the hundreds and hundreds of flags – perhaps thousands – displayed over the next few hours, I saw only two Confederate battle flags and one white supremacist sign, the latter of which some suspected aloud was a leftist plant. The two flags and one sign, I thought, would feature prominently in news media reports to present a false image of the nature of the crowd.

A large group of African-American men sported shirts that said “Blacks for Trump.” Figuring that journalists would emphasize the solitary racist sign and Confederate flags, deliberately ignoring the rest, I took note of the fact that many demonstrators were black, Asian, and Latino, with a strong presence of Vietnamese- and Chinese-Americans.

Respect for the city and streets

The DC government had placed only one portable toilet along the 16-block Constitution Avenue route, and five more near the intersection with Pennsylvania Avenue near the Canadian Embassy. The federal government opened the Ronald Reagan Building so people could use the bathrooms.

The city had provided few trash bins. (DC usually provides a large number of toilets and trash receptacles along march routes.) Yet remarkably little litter could be seen in the streets. People crushed their plastic water bottles and food wrappers and stuffed them in their pockets, and a few marchers picked up the occasional trash along the route.

Observations about the toilets and trash are noteworthy because, in my experience with and among large protest crowds in Washington, the large leftist crowds tend to be angry and leave trash in the streets and urine in the shrubs.

None of that anger showed in the January 6 crowd along Constitution Avenue.

The exceptions: Organized cadre

Although the crowd represented a broad cross-section of Americans – mostly working class by their appearance and manner of speech (the Deplorables from Flyover Country, as an old politician once called them) – some people stood out.

A very few didn't share the jovial, friendly, earnest demeanor of the great majority. Some obviously didn't fit in. Among them were younger twentysomethings wearing new Trump or MAGA hats, often with the visor in the back, showing no enthusiasm and either looking at the ground, or glowering, or holding out their phones with outstretched arms to make videos of as many faces as possible in the crowd. Some appeared awkward, the way someone's body language inadvertently shows the world that he feels like he doesn't fit in. A few seemed to be nursing a deep, churning rage.

They generally covered their faces with cloth masks, as opposed to the pro-Trump people, few of whom wore masks at all. They walked, often hands in pockets, in clusters of perhaps four to six with at least one of them frequently looking behind. These outliers group looked like trouble. I presumed that these **fake Trump protesters** were Antifa or something similar. However, that entire afternoon I saw none of them act aggressively or cause any problems. At least, not from my vantage point.

A second outlier group also stood out. While many marchers wore military camouflage shirts, jackets, or pants of various patterns and states of wear and in all shapes and sizes, here and there one would see people of a different type: Wiry young men in good physical condition dressed neatly in what looked like newer camouflage uniforms with black gear, subdued patches including Punisher skulls, and helmets.

They showed tidiness and discipline. They strode instead of walked, moving at a more rapid pace than most of the people, sometimes breaking into a short jog, and generally keeping to the left side of Constitution Avenue in pairs of two or small groups of three. Unlike others in old military clothes who tended to be affable and talkative, these sullen men seemed not to speak to anyone at all. As we would see, they were the **disciplined, uniformed column of attackers**.

Entering the US Capitol grounds

We walked about three blocks behind the front of the march to the Capitol, with perhaps two or three thousand people ahead of us. The DC Metropolitan police were their usual professionally detached selves, standing on curbs or at street crossings and exchanging an

occasional greeting from marchers, but treating the event as routine and at the lowest threat level.

When we crossed First Street NW to enter the Capitol grounds where the Capitol Police had jurisdiction, I noticed no police at all. Several marchers expressed surprise. Passing by a few days earlier, I had noticed that, with presidential inaugural platform construction underway, the Capitol's West Front lawn had been blocked off with plastic. On this day, there was no barrier blocking the paved footpath with its high granite curbs on either side leading up the Senate side of the hill. The openness seemed like a courtesy gesture from Congress, which controlled security.

But that appearance of low threat level made no sense. American flags flew over the Senate and House chambers, indicating that each house of Congress was in session. Vice President Mike Pence was supposed to be there to certify the electoral votes. For better or worse, this was a historic day in Congress. Yet no Capitol Police appeared anywhere from what we could see, and I commented on to my companion that it was very strange for there to be no police during a joint session of Congress – with or without a gigantic crowd.

At a low point of ground, we crossed on top of what looked like a length of black aluminum fencing that had been placed flat over a wet area of mud or dead leaves in the walkway. It was the only thing out of place in what was becoming a funnel of people marching in from the broad merger of the six-lane Constitution Avenue and four-lane Pennsylvania Avenue and a Senate staff parking lot and park to the footpath. What looked like tens or even hundreds of thousands of people surged down the avenues as far as one could see.

At the West Front of the Capitol: Spirited disorder

The marchers became denser as greater numbers of people funneled into the paved footpath going up Capitol Hill, but almost everyone seemed talkative and happy. The path was interrupted by a few steps and a handrail in the middle, going on until a second set of steps ended at a plaza at the Capitol's crypt level.

The first thing we saw was the temporary news media tower built for cameras to transmit the upcoming presidential inauguration. As if at a party, some younger Trump supporters had climbed the tower and waved American and political flags. The tower stood before the painted wooden inaugural stand itself, with its VIP section above the balcony-like protrusion where Joe Biden would be sworn in as president. Windbreaks or something similar, made of metal scaffolding and covered with a façade of white cloth or plastic sheeting, rose above the north and south ends of the platform. No police could be seen on the platform for now.

No police could be seen anywhere.

People kept surging in from Constitution Avenue and the plaza quickly filled up and overflowed onto the lawn. Everyone squeezed closer and closer together, with most in high spirits. Some trouble began up in the front, near the base of the inaugural platform itself, but

we could not see what was happening.

Many of us looked on our phones for texts or Twitter messages to find out what was happening, but there was no functioning wireless service; too many people with phones in too small an area overloaded the cell phone transmission facilities.

The Capitol Police

The United States Capitol Police recruit a special kind of professional. They are sworn to defend one of the most important building complexes in the country, the US Capitol and its sprawling congressional office buildings. More importantly, their mission is to defend one of the three coequal branches of the federal government, literally upholding the Constitution. Every day they deal with thousands of tourists and visitors from around the country and the world. They have to be serious with their mission, but constantly show patience with the often frustrating and even annoying throngs of ordinary visitors and those with inflated egos who consider themselves Very Important People.

Normally, the Capitol Police are excellent at communicating with crowds. Not today.

A contingent of perhaps thirty to fifty Capitol Police emerged at the top of the inaugural platform above the VIP section and worked their way down to the spot where Biden would take his oath of office. It was after 1:17, according to my camera. They were armed with paintball-type long guns that fired capsules of pepper irritant, teargas launchers, and long guns that I could not identify from my position. Something was happening on the plaza level below them, but we couldn't see.

To our left on the Senate side, a scuffle had already broken out but we were so packed so tightly that we couldn't see or hear. The biggest feature was the imposing edifice of the Capitol itself, the party-like guys up on the camera tower, and the endless crowd of people flowing in with colorful flags – American, MAGA, South Vietnamese, even one from Kazakhstan. Many eyes were on the Capitol police in their black tactical gear, bright yellow-green safety vests, and weapons.

Some out-of-towners wondered why the police were there when they were all pro-police and no Antifa were present. Others said that they did see Antifa wearing backward MAGA hats, so the police must have been waiting for them. I quietly wondered why so few police were present for a crowd this or any size.

Confusion as police fire tear gas at their supporters

Then something happened at the front of the crowd, as if a champagne cork popped to release pent-up human energy. It seemed like a scuffle, but from forty feet back, I couldn't see. People started chanting "USA, USA," and other slogans. Some burst with streams of

profanity about Biden, Pelosi, and “the steal.” For a few seconds I saw what looked like police in a tussle with some of the marchers up front – what appeared to be an organized group in civilian clothes.

This organized group are the cell I call the “plainclothes militants.” They fit right in with the MAGA people.

Suddenly energy surged from the front of the crowd as the anti-riot police, above on the inaugural platform, visibly tensed up. Some sighted their pepper ball weapons toward the densely packed people. One fired a teargas canister – not at the plainclothes militants at the front line, but into the crowd itself. Then another. Flash grenades went off in the middle of the crowd.

I had seen anti-riot police in action before. They moved with a decisive sense of purpose. Now, the Capitol Police crew seemed confused, as if without a leader or perhaps inadequate rules of engagement. These real professionals seemed directionless. Some clambered up and down the inaugural platform steps. Others milled back and forth at the swearing-in level. Most of the police ended up leaving the surreal scene. Nobody could tell why.

Pro-police people felt like they were being attacked

No bullhorn or sound system could be heard for the police to communicate with the swelling mass of people.

The tear gas changed the crowd’s demeanor. There was an air of disbelief as people realized that the police whom they supported were firing on them. “What are you doing to us – we support you,” someone yelled. Tear gas wafted through the crowd, a low-grade irritant, fortunately, as if to send a warning to disperse. But nobody could disperse; some tried to leave the area, but more kept flowing in from Constitution Avenue, making evacuation impossible.

All of a sudden, pro-police people felt that the police were attacking them, and they didn’t know why. Instead of running away, the people stood their ground. Something seemed to break loose a second time toward the front, but we couldn’t tell what it was. Younger members of the crowd climbed the scaffolding inside the north façade of the inaugural platform and waved flags from the top. The crowd cheered.

More tear gas. A canister struck a girl in the face, drawing blood. The pro-police crowd went from disbelief and confusion to anger. A few dozen members of the crowd, mostly young men, raced up a narrow path on the stone steps behind the façade and a limestone wall, facing a few police at the top who tried to stop them.

The police disappeared and a crowd surged up the stairs to the plaza at the Senate entry level. People inside the façade tore through to wave flags. As another canister of tear gas went off, a few people started pushing against the current of incoming marchers to leave the

area.

Provocateurs show someone planned to turn unsuspecting marchers into an invading mob

Then, a loud, bellowing shout from behind: “Forward! Do not retreat! Forward!”

Retreat? Nobody was retreating. They were trying to escape the tear gas. But the man kept yelling not to “retreat,” as if this were a military operation. In a powerful voice he exhorted the crowd to remain on the plaza and not to disperse on the lawn or depart down the steps to the footpath. Thousands more people continued pouring in from Constitution Avenue.

Then two other men, standing across from one another on the high granite curbs on either side of the footpath, bellowed variations of, “Forward! Don’t you dare retreat!” Some made direct eye contact at people and pointed directly at them, as if trying to psyche them to submit.

Still more tear gas, this time with green or yellow smoke. I was concerned that my companion, who was recovering from a previously injured foot, might get knocked down if the people started to stampede for air. Once someone falls down in a panicked crowd, there’s a dangerous risk of getting trampled to death. I opened the way for others to exit, with other marchers lending a hand. But most of the people stood where they were as more marchers flowed up Capitol Hill.

A third man standing on a chair, also shouting “Forward,” reached down to grab me by the shoulder and barked, “Don’t retreat! Get back up there!” It wasn’t an expression of enthusiasm or solidarity; it sounded like a military order. And it wasn’t from a wild kid; this guy was probably in his 50s. He looked furious with me.

What did he care what I did? What difference would the departure of ten or even a hundred of us make, with so many more surging in. The furious man crouched down and yelled in my face: “We’re going into the Capitol!” I ignored him, broke away, and worked my way down the steps.

“What a stupid idiot,” I thought. “You can’t just walk into the Capitol anymore. Especially not today.” Bystanders helped my companion and me mount the high stone curb to the grass, where we chatted with new people we met and wondered what was happening up front.

What the barking men were doing didn’t hit me later when we found out about the attack: They appeared to be part of an organized cell of **agents-provocateurs** to corral people as an unwitting follow-on force behind the **plainclothes militants** tussling with police – but who, we would later learn, were actually breaking into the Capitol beneath the Great Rotunda to storm Congress. It was just before 3 o’clock.

These agents-provocateurs placed hundreds of unsuspecting supporters of the president in physical danger. They attempted to block exits for people seeking to escape tear gas. They endangered vulnerable people, including children, the frail, and the elderly. They funneled and pushed hundreds if not thousands of innocent people into a crush toward the Capitol. They did so with the goal of forcing those people into a confrontation with federal police defending Congress.

Surreal pandemonium

Nobody seemed aware that the Capitol was physically under attack. The tear gas caused pandemonium. But there was still no stampede, and people helped create or widen paths to allow others to leave the area. Some, seeing frail or elderly people who had a hard time standing, broke into a pallet of black folding chairs for the inauguration and distributed them. But the mood had gone from patriotic – though contemptuous of Congress – to furious.

Rumors spread. “They say they’re going into the Congress,” someone said.

“Good,” someone else said, though more as an exclamation of anger at being teargassed than anything else.

“That’s stupid. Cops will never let ‘em in,” said others, or in words to that effect.

Some blamed House Speaker Nancy Pelosi for ordering the police to gas her political opponents, then wondered aloud whether she really could do that. Somebody was able to get phone reception to ask if anybody knew what was happening, but couldn’t hear because of the crowd. Texting and social media posting was almost nonexistent because of overloaded towers.

Having spent decades around the Capitol since my days as a junior Senate and House staffer, and loving the building and its history as one of our greatest national treasures, I was confident that the Capitol would remain safe. But the lack of perimeter police presence, and the confused actions of those firing tear gas, flash grenades, and pepper balls from the presidential swearing-in platform, had me thinking that something was wrong at the command level. What if someone did break into the Capitol? Not possible.

From out there on the lawn, a breakdown in police command and control was unthinkable.

By now, where we were on the Senate lawn, the mood was more like an outdoor rock concert gone out of control. Someone with a master key took control of a green cherry-picker, raising two people on the crane who took pictures and waved. Others kept people back to prevent injuries. Conscientious people looked out for the unaware or foolish. Several young people scaled the basement wall of the Senate to join people who had taken the steps to the top.

For the first time we saw a group of journalists with their cameras, computers, and transmitting gear. A few Capitol Police milled around, some winded as if they had seen action.

Uniformed, disciplined cadre assembles for attack

Then, from the north, a column of uniformed, agile younger men walked briskly, single-file, toward the inaugural stand. They came within two feet of me. The camouflage uniforms were clean, neat, and with a pattern I couldn't identify. Some had helmets and GoPro cameras. Some uniforms bore subdued insignia, including the Punisher skull. These were the **disciplined, uniformed column of attackers**. I had seen them in groups of two or three among the marchers on Connecticut Avenue from the Ellipse.

Now there were a good three dozen of them, moving in a single, snakelike formation. They were organized. They were disciplined. They were prepared.

"We're taking the Capitol!" the first or second announced.

"You're gonna get arrested," someone called out.

"They can arrest some of us, but not all of us," another member of the uniformed contingent shouted to no one in particular.

A few curious younger people left their friends to follow them as the group disappeared under the scaffolding beneath the Rotunda entrance.

Some in the crowd expressed frustrated hope that the uniformed men could teach Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell a lesson, but nobody seemed to believe that they would actually do it.

I tried to text a friend to report what was happening. The jammed cell phone system made it impossible.

Spectacle of the weird on the East Front

A small group of us exited toward Constitution Avenue, north of the Senate Wing. Someone said they had seen a person inside a second-floor window holding a "Stop the Steal" sign.

"They got into the House and Senate," someone told us. "It's crazy."

A circus awaited us on the East Front of the Senate Wing. At the foot of the Senate steps, a victorious-looking crowd stood there, hanging around. A semi-naked man in what looked like a fur caveman outfit, with a Braveheart-painted face and Viking horns, struck a weirdly heroic pose as people took pictures.

The crowd there was different. People were talking about how the Capitol had been invaded. A rumor spread that "the cops shot and killed a woman inside." The rumors were true.

We wanted to stay but decided against it. As we passed by the fountain that formed the glass roof of the visitors' center below, several dozen Capitol Police, wearing anti-riot body armor and holding transparent shields, accompanied by what looked like DC anti-riot police and about a dozen DC National Guardsmen, walked past us in irregular formation, heading toward the Capitol Building.

Some seemed winded, as if they had been in an incident, perhaps where we had been on the other side of the Senate. One officer stayed behind to help a brother policeman who seemed to have trouble walking; a mask obscured his face but his skin looked swollen and red. He kept on walking.

We didn't know what to say or do. It didn't seem real, but it was. The time was 3:32 PM.

We went home in silence.

Post script

As said in the introduction, this article is purely my eyewitness account from notes taken the evening of January 6 and morning of January 7. They are not tainted by any news or information from outside sources, so they do not contain many details that are public.

Hat tip to my old friend S. Steven "Scott" Powell, author of "Covert Cadre," which inspired the headline.